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SUBJECT: VISIT OF HDAC COMMITTEE, AUGUST 27-31, 2007

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Colombia's congress passed President Uribe's top legislative priorities in its latest session, and its members look forward to developing institutional ties with the U.S. Congress. Security has markedly improved with successful military efforts to re-take areas controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) over the last five years. Improved security helped lift the Colombian economy to record growth in the first quarter of 2007. The Uribe Administration seeks U.S. Congressional support for the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (CTPA) which President Uribe considers key to spur economic growth, attract international investors, and boost revenues to fund social programs and the fight against narco-terrorism. Eradication of coca and poppy crops and interdiction of cocaine and heroin have reached record levels, but Colombia remains the main supplier of cocaine to the United States. Since taking office, President Uribe has approved well over 500 extraditions to the United States.

¶2. (SBU) In January, the GOC presented a Plan Colombia consolidation strategy with increased emphasis on social development and territorial control. Trade unionists continue to suffer from violence, but the number of unionists killed fell by over 60 percent from 2002-2006. The GOC also continues to make progress on human rights cases. Over 32,000 paramilitaries have demobilized since 2002, and a further 11,000 have deserted from all illegal armed groups (about half from the FARC). The release of the three U.S. contractors captured by the FARC in February 2003, the longest held U.S. hostages in the world, is a top priority. End Summary.

Colombian Congress

¶3. (U) Your visit will demonstrate our broad engagement with Colombia, and serve as recognition of the country's strong, independent institutions. Colombia's bicameral congress is composed of 102 nationally elected Senate members and 166 House members ("Deputies") who are elected from party lists in each department. The Congress has a functional committee structure with seven standing committees in the Senate and House. House committees have 18-33 members and Senate committees have 13-19 members. Parties supporting President Uribe have a majority in both the Senate and House. The opposition left-of center Polo Democratico party and the traditional Liberal party play an important role, by ensuring Congress debates controversial issues fully.

¶4. (U) The 1991 Constitution made Congress a more important player in the policy-making process by limiting the president's power to issue decrees, demand urgent

consideration of legislation, and declare states of emergency. The veto override margin was reduced from two-thirds of Congress to a simple majority. A new party reform law ("Ley de Bancadas") attempts to increase party discipline by requiring that members vote with their parties except on votes of conscience. Still, Congress is weakened by the large number of parties (a 2003 political party reform law effectively reduced the number of parties from 60 to about ten by requiring a minimum threshold of votes to gain a seat in Congress), infrequency of roll-calls, and annual party leadership rotations.

15. (U) During its February-June session, Congress passed the president's top legislative priorities, including the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (CTPA), a National Development Plan for 2006-2010, and a critical bill reforming federal and state revenue sharing. The reform bill, considered key to the government's long-term fiscal health, was highly unpopular and generated numerous protests. Its passage represented a major victory for President Uribe. Legislators have now focused on upcoming local elections in October. Significant legislation before the elections appears unlikely.

16. (U) Public approval of Congress has declined as a result of the parapolitical scandal: so far, fourteen congresspersons are in jail for para-links, and another fifteen are under investigation. Public approval of Congress, traditionally relatively high for Latin America, has dropped from 55 percent in mid 2006 to about 35 percent in recent polling due to the para-scandal.

GOC Security Outlook

17. (SBU) USG security assistance combats drug trafficking and terrorism and includes training, material aid, and technical assistance to security forces and other institutions. The U.S. is Colombia's most important ally and President Uribe appreciates that his government's achievements on security would not have been possible without U.S. help.

18. (SBU) The increased military effort to establish Colombian government control in areas dominated by the FARC has been successful over the last five years. The FARC has failed in its efforts to mount a major attack against Bogota and its environs since November 2003, although they have tried repeatedly. The military now operates in the historic heartland of the FARC and in the main coca growing regions in the country. Landmines, disease, logistic issues, limited airlift, and distance, and difficult terrain all restrain the public forces, but they are making progress. Nevertheless, the FARC can launch attacks on isolated or smaller government targets.

19. (SBU) With USG support, the GOC formed in 2005 an interagency body, the Center for Coordinated Integral Action (CCAI), to link the delivery of social services and establishment of a civilian presence to military efforts. CCAI delivers social services in nine key areas, with a combined population of almost two million, that traditionally fell under the control of illegal armed groups. The Center provides immediate social services once the Colombian government has secured an area.

Fighting Narcotrafficking

110. (SBU) President Uribe is committed to defeating narcotrafficking, and the GOC has invested substantial resources in this effort. The eradication of coca and poppy fields and the interdiction of cocaine and heroin reached record levels in 2006. The GOC is increasing its manual eradication program, but understands manual eradication cannot replace aerial spraying. The GOC seeks a

complementary approach using both methods. Security forces seized a near-record 203 metric tons of cocaine and coca base in 2006, and destroyed a record 200 cocaine laboratories. We are working with the GOC to refine the eradication strategy and determine how to transfer key tasks from the USG to the GOC. The GOC is also fighting narcotrafficking through extradition. President Uribe has approved over 500 extraditions to the United States, including 87 cases so far in 2007. Colombia remains the main supplier of cocaine to the United States, but eradication and seizures have taken some USD 400 million out of the hands of the FARC and Colombian mafias.

Plan Colombia Next Steps

¶11. (SBU) In January, the GOC presented a Plan Colombia consolidation strategy. The proposal contains a heightened emphasis on social development, assigning new resources to consolidate governance, promote human rights, and to help displaced people, Afro-Colombian, and indigenous communities. It also aims to reintegrate 42,000 demobilized ex-combatants and deserters and to promote Colombia's licit exports. The GOC seeks funding from the United States and European countries to support the consolidation strategy.

¶12. (U) Increased emphasis on social development dovetails with USAID programs. USAID currently funds programs in four key strategic sectors in Colombia: alternative development and economic policy reform; justice reform, human rights and strengthening governance; demobilization and reintegration of illegal armed groups, and; assistance to internally displaced persons (Colombia has between 2 and 3 million displaced persons), Afro-Colombians and other vulnerable populations.

Positive Economic Outlook

¶13. (U) Improved security helped boost the Colombian economy. 2006 GDP growth was 6.8 percent, while 2007 first quarter growth reached 8.1 percent, the highest in Colombian history. Both exports and imports grew more than 20 percent in 2006. The United States remains Colombia's largest trade partner (approximately 40 percent of exports and 28 percent of imports). Colombian exports to the U.S. have grown USD 1 billion per year since the inception of the Andean Trade Preferences and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA) in late 2002; U.S. exports to Colombia increased approximately USD 2 billion. The largest U.S. investors -- Drummond (coal), ChevronTexaco and ExxonMobil -- plan considerable expansion due to the improved investment climate and security situation. Foreign Direct Investment increased to USD 8.9 billion in 2006, quadruple the FDI in 2002.

¶14. (SBU) The CTPA remains the GOC's highest economic priority. The Colombian Congress approved the CTPA in June. The Uribe administration introduced the modification protocol signed in June in the Colombian Congress on July 20. GOC officials expect to vote on the protocol in October. The U.S. Congress has extended trade preferences for Colombian exporters under the Andean Trade Preferences Act (ATPA), the successor to the ATPDEA, through February 2008. The Colombian government will seek your guidance on next steps to help it achieve ratification of the CTPA in the U.S. Congress.

Labor

¶15. (U) Trade unionists continue to be victims of violence, but the number of unionists killed fell by over 60 percent from 2002-2006. This drop reflects the GOC's success in reducing violence across the country (overall homicides fell by over 40 percent during the same period), as well as increased funding for special protection programs for

unionists, human rights activists, journalists, and other threatened groups. The GOC's Protection Program assisted over 10,000 people, including unionists, in 2006. The GOC expects to spend some USD 34 million on protection in 2007. The Prosecutor General's human rights unit is investigating 204 priority labor violence cases. The GOC will add USD 40 million to its 2008 budget to add nearly 500 prosecutors, staff and investigators to working labor cases and other human rights cases.

Military Justice and Improved Human Rights Record

¶16. (SBU) The Uribe Administration continues to make slow progress on human rights cases involving military abuse or collaboration with paramilitaries. Minister of Defense Santos has identified military justice reform as a top priority; in October, he named the first civilian -- and the first woman -- as director of the Military Criminal Justice System. Santos also recently set up a high-level commission to address a troubling up-tick in alleged extrajudicial killings by the military. Human rights training is mandatory for all members of the military and police.

Demobilization and Peace Process

¶17. (SBU) Over 32,000 former paramilitaries have demobilized since 2002, and a further 11,000 have deserted from all illegal armed groups (about half from the FARC). FARC desertions increased significantly in 2007. The GOC has developed a reintegration program to meet the demobilized needs -- the largest such reintegration program ever attempted. The effort continues while the GOC battles the FARC and ELN. A small percentage of renegade paramilitaries have joined new criminal groups, which have shed all political pretensions to focus on drug trafficking, racketeering, and other crimes. Job creation is a priority, but many of the demobilized have few employable skills and need intense psycho-social and vocational training before they can enter the labor force.

¶18. (SBU) The Justice and Peace Law process -- which provides reduced 5-8 year sentences for paramilitaries guilty of human rights abuses in exchange for truth and reparations -- is exposing the full extent of paramilitary penetration of Colombian society and government. It has helped solve over 200 murders and led to the exhumation of over 800 bodies of paramilitary victims. President Uribe strongly supports the Justice and Peace process, as well as the Supreme Court's investigations into links between paramilitaries and legislators.

¶19. (SBU) The smaller National Liberation Army (ELN) has negotiated with the GOC in Cuba for two years without success. Talks have stalled largely because the ELN overestimates its leverage, insisting on substantive political reforms (rejection of FTA, greater regional autonomy, etc.) that are unacceptable to the GOC. The ELN also rejects GOC terms for cease-fire monitoring and hostage release verification. The ELN continues to kidnap victims to finance its operations, but their military capability has been sharply degraded. The FARC had refused to engage in any meaningful peace talks, and recently killed eleven state legislators that had been held hostage for five years. President Uribe recently authorized opposition Senator Piedad Cordoba to serve as a go-between with the FARC. Cordoba took a group of relatives of FARC-held hostages to Caracas to meet with President Chavez. Chavez offered to act as an "observer and guarantor" for a humanitarian exchange of FARC-held hostages for FARC terrorists held by the GOC, and suggested Venezuela as a possible site for talks.

U.S. Hostages

¶20. (SBU) The three U.S. contractors captured by the FARC in February 2003 remain the longest held U.S. hostages in the world. Their safe release remains a top priority. The Colombian government continues to provide full assistance. President Uribe has assured us that the U.S. hostages will be included in any humanitarian exchange.

Nichols